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## How Group Identification Helps to Overcome the Dilemma of Collective Action

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# How Group Identification Helps to Overcome the Dilemma of Collective Action

BERT KLANDERMANS

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*According to the basic assumption underlying this article, people are more likely to participate in protest the more they feel that a group they identify with is treated unjustly. Depersonalization and the politicization of group identification are discussed as two processes that mediate the relationship between group identification and protest participation. Empirical evidence from three studies is discussed. In a study among people older than 55, participation in unions for the elderly appears to be correlated strongly with identification with the elderly. In a study of participation in peaceful protest among South African citizens, indicators of identification appeared to be correlated with protest participation, and finally, Dutch farmers were more likely to participate in farmers' protest the more they identified with other farmers. Results from the latter, longitudinal study suggest a recursive relationship between identity and protest participation: Group identification fosters protest participation and protest participation reinforces group identification.*

**Collective action is not** a very common response to injustice. When confronted with injustice, at best, a minority of the people affected will engage in protest. Most people will continue to do what they are used to doing, that is, nothing. Collective action literature has attempted to account for nonparticipation by referring to the social dilemma of protest. As a rule, the goals protesters are aiming for are collective goods. Once such goods are produced, they are available to everybody irrespective of whether people have participated in any protest. At the same time, the achievement of the collective good is rarely dependent on the participation of a single person. So, why should one go through the effort of participating in political protest if goal achievement is not dependent on one's own participation and if one will reap the benefits once the goal is achieved in any case? Indeed, Olson (1968) in his formulation of the collective action dilemma stated that rational individuals would take a free ride in such situations.

Perhaps satisfactory as an explanation of why so many people do not participate, Olson's (1968) theory is not very helpful in trying to understand why some people do participate. In fact, there is growing evidence that rationality is too

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limited a theoretical framework to account for participation in protest in response to injustice. It is therefore no accident that Klandermans (1997) adds identity to such concepts as injustice and efficacy (as the rationality component of his model is labeled) to construct his social psychology of protest. In this article I will argue, on theoretical and empirical grounds, that group identification helps to overcome collective action dilemmas.

Injustice, efficacy, and identity are the three core concepts of the social psychology of protest (Klandermans, 1997). A sense of injustice arises from the moral indignation about how authorities handle some societal problem. Often, such problems concern illegitimate inequality, but it may also concern a suddenly imposed grievance (for example, toxic waste, the trajectory of a high-speed train), or a belief that certain moral principles have been violated (human rights, abortion, refugees). Efficacy refers to the conviction that it is possible to change the situation via collective action at reasonable costs. Identity has two aspects: a "we" that is a definition of the group or collective treated unjustly and a "they" that is a definition of some institution or authority that is responsible for the injustice. Compared to injustice and efficacy, identity is a relatively recent acquisition in the literature on discontent and protest. In the sociologically oriented literature, it surfaced in the late 1980s as "collective identity" (Cohen, 1985; Melucci, 1988; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). In the social psychologically oriented literature, it appears as "social identity," for example, in the work of Reicher (1984, 1996), Major (1994), Brewer and Silver (2000) Simon et al. (1998), and Kelly and Breinlinger (1996). Indeed, it is remarkable that it took so long for identity to receive attention from students of political protest because it is so obvious that it plays an important role in protest behavior.

## OVERVIEW

In this article, I will concentrate on the link between identity and protest. It is important, however, to realize that identity is just one of three concepts. Theoretically, one may assume that identity only explains part of the variance in protest behavior. Little is known about the relative weight of the three factors in the prediction of protest behavior; research investigating injustice, efficacy, identity and their interrelationships is rare. Mummendey, Klink, Mielke, Wenzel, and Blanz (1999) have examined the differential impact of identity and injustice on the way inhabitants of former East Germany react, postunification, to their disadvantaged position in comparison to West Germans. Their findings suggest that identity is more important than feelings of injustice in the explanation of collective responses to their disadvantaged position. Kelly and Breinlinger (1996) and Simon et al. (1998) have demonstrated that group identification is as important for participation in a social movement as cost-benefit considerations. Indeed, Simon et al. (1998) concluded that there are two independent pathways to social movement participation, or at least to willingness to participate. "One

pathway seems to be *calculation* of the costs and benefits of participation. . . . The second pathway seems to be *identification* with the movement, or in other words adoption of a distinct activist identity" (p. 656, original emphasis). Kelly and Breinlinger (1996) arrived at a similar conclusion but they observed a moderating role of identification. They suggested that in the case of weak group identification, the calculative route is of more importance than in the case of strong group identification.

There are sufficient reasons for looking into the role of identity in political protest. The basic assumption underlying this article is simple: The more someone identifies with a group the more likely it is that he will participate in protest if he feels that his group is treated unjustly. In this contribution, I will elaborate on this assumption. In addition to theoretical argumentation, I will present three different studies that have investigated the link between identity and protest. These concern a study of political participation by the elderly in the Netherlands, a study of political protest in South Africa, and a study of a farmers' protest in the Netherlands. I will start with a conceptualization of the relationship between identity and protest and then discuss how identity can be linked empirically to protest participation.

#### COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, SOCIAL IDENTITY, AND GROUP IDENTIFICATION

The literature on social movements and political protest is far from clear on the concept of identity. The problems stem from the tendency to apply the concept of identity to diverging phenomena at different levels of analysis without showing any awareness of those different levels. I will illustrate the confusion by comparing the concept of collective identity as it features in the social movement literature and in social psychology.

Taylor and Whittier (1992, p. 172) define "collective" identity as "shared definitions of a group that derive from members' common interests and solidarity." Collective identity is a social construction in their eyes; that is to say, it results from ongoing interaction with others in a wider environment. It has a certain continuity, as it lasts longer than individual membership. On entering the group, the individual is socialized into the group's collective identity. Collective identity also implies a demarcation from other groups. It reflects a certain self-consciousness but also recognition. Tajfel (1978, p. 63) defines "social" identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups), together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership." Because individuals belong to many different groups and categories, their social identity is necessarily based on the membership of a variety of groups, some of which become more or less salient as a result of circumstances.

The best illustration of the difference between the two concepts, social and collective identity, is the different ways in which they are measured. Collective

identity is measured by means of analysis of written documents, by studying the symbols of the group, its common language, its group culture, and so on; social identity is measured by means of interviews or questionnaires, with scales designed to measure identification. To put it simply, collective identity is a characteristic of a group, social identity is a characteristic of an individual. Most research on social identity actually concerns identification with a single group.

Social identity theory deconstructs social identity into the following three components: a cognitive component, which refers to the process of social categorization; an evaluative component, which refers to the group's status compared to that of others; and an affective component, which refers to the commitment to the group. In the remainder of this article, I use the term *group identification* to refer to the affective component of social identity. In my own work, I have distinguished a behavioral dimension of group identification, drawing on Andrews's (1991) distinction between voluntary and involuntary group membership. Sex, age, and race are examples of groups people are involuntary members of. Membership of such groups is not a matter of choice, whereas membership of voluntary groups is. As a consequence, voluntary group memberships tells us something about how someone perceives himself or herself; it may even underscore or deny involuntary group membership. For example, a Suriname in the Netherlands may deliberately decide to become (or not) a member of a Suriname organization; an elderly person may choose in favor of or against membership of a union of the elderly. Elsewhere, I have defined membership of identity organizations as the behavioral component of group identification (De Weerd & Klandermans, 1999). There is reason to assume that the behavioral component of group identification is more important for protest than the other components of identification. Simon et al. (1998), for instance, observed that identification with the gay movement or with unions of the elderly predicted protest participation better than identification with the broader categories of gay and the elderly in general.

#### DEPERSONALIZATION AND THE POLITICIZATION OF GROUP IDENTIFICATION

To understand the role of group identification for participation in political protest, we must gain some insight into the following two processes: (a) depersonalization, that is, when a person begins to act as a member of a group, and (b) politicization of group identification, meaning that the identification with a specific group acquires political relevance.

*Depersonalization.* During an episode of protest, individual participants act as a member of a group. However, individuals are members of a multitude of groups and categories. What makes them identify with a specific group and not with some other? Many studies in the social identity tradition never get to this question because they do not start from competing possibilities but from one existing group or a group created in the laboratory. The turbulent social political

reality is seldom that simple. In fact, matters precisely revolve around competing groups.

Take, for example, the movement against cruise missiles in the Netherlands in the 1980s. Part of the movement's constituency consisted of supporters of the Christian Democratic Party, but that party formed part of the government that was in favor of deployment of the missiles. The more the movement evolved a stance opposed to the government in office, the more these people came under cross-pressure. Depending on which allegiance was most salient for them, they made their choice (Oegema & Klandermans, 1994). Another example, this time from social history, is that of working-class women. With whom were they to identify? With the workers and thus join the labor movement, or with other women and thus join the women's movement? Such problems of identification are as topical today as they were a century ago, as witnessed by the growing attention for so-called multiple identities in social movement literature (cf. Kurtz, in press).

Turner, Oakes, Haslam, and McGarty (1994) emphasize the context dependency of self-categorization. Depending on circumstances, certain categories may become more salient. They deny that social identity or the self are stable psychological structures. These authors are interested in what they call *depersonalization*; that is, the inclination of a person not to act as a unique individual but as a member of a group. The more people are treated as a member of a group and the better the fit between our perceptions of them and the stereotypical image, the higher the degree of depersonalization. This is in line with what we know from the literature on protest. This literature refers to so-called "imposed identities" (Morris, 1992), identities that are imposed on people by their environment. Part of someone's identity as woman, African, or refugee may be imposed on her because different environments treat her in different ways.

*Politicization of group identification.* The fact that a category becomes salient does not imply that it also becomes politically relevant. The politicization of group identification is a separate process that requires an independent explanation (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). In the social movement literature, the politicization of collective identity implies that a group defines itself in opposition to some political authority. That does not occur spontaneously.

Social movement literature suggests the following scenario: collectively defined grievances produce a "we" feeling; causal attribution points to a "they," which is held responsible for the grievances; if authorities are considered to be the culprit, interaction with these authorities will rapidly politicize collective identity. This is especially so when authorities are unresponsive to the demands or react in repressive ways (Gamson, 1992; Gamson, Fireman, & Rytina, 1982; Hirsch, 1990; Taylor & Whittier, 1992).

According to social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), collective action is one of three possible status-improvement strategies. The other two are (a) individual attempts to leave the group and to become a member of a more

positively evaluated group, and (b) attempts to redefine the comparison process itself by choosing other reference groups or standards of comparison. A preference for one of these strategies is determined, according to SIT, by structural characteristics of the situation—the stability and legitimacy of the situation and the permeability of group boundaries. Unstable situations that are defined as illegitimate in combination with impermeable group boundaries are believed to encourage collective action (Ellemers, 1993).

An important distinction between the social movement and social identity literature concerns the processes of causal attribution and the interaction with authorities. These processes are crucial in the social movement literature but neglected by SIT. In real life, assessment of the situation is usually the outcome of interactions with authorities or the conclusion after several attempts to change the situation. For example, Taylor and McKirnan (1984) conceive collective action as the final stage in a process that begins with attempts of individual mobility.

#### CAUSALITY

I have looked so far at the impact of identity on participation. Indeed, this is the model that Mummendey et al. (1999), Kelly and Breinlinger (1996), and Simon et al. (1998) have tested. Nevertheless, the reverse relationship is equally plausible. As mentioned, Turner et al. (1994) suggested that involvement in collective conflict is a strong determinant of group identification. I assume that both causal directions are equally likely to occur. Most probably, there is a circular relationship. Group identification makes participation in protest more likely, and in turn participation intensifies group identification. We may assume that success or failure of protest plays a role in this regard, but the evidence is inconclusive. Such dynamics are known from the commitment literature: Commitment to the organization reinforces participation, and participation in turn strengthens commitment (Barling, Fullagar, & Kelloway, 1992).

In the remainder of this article, I will discuss the results of three studies that reveal different aspects of the link between group identification and protest: a study of political participation among the elderly in the Netherlands, a study of participation in political protest in South Africa, and a study of protest participation by Dutch farmers. Each study illustrates a different aspect of what I have discussed so far. The study of political participation among the elderly compares the impact of the cognitive and affective components of social identity. The study of protest participation in South Africa compares the impact of the affective and behavioral components of identity. The same holds for the farmers' protest study, but, in addition, this study provides the opportunity to look into causality (does identification stimulate protest or is it the other way around?). My objective is to show how these aspects of group identification are connected to participation in political protest.



# COGNITIVE VERSUS AFFECTIVE IDENTIFICATION: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AMONG THE ELDERLY

At some point, everybody inevitably belongs to the category of the elderly. As is the case with other involuntary groups such as sex or race, no one can withdraw from its membership. But, unlike sex or race, it is unclear exactly when someone passes the line beyond which he or she belongs to the elderly population. As a consequence, there is plenty of room for socially creative ways of status maintenance (for example, redefining the boundaries). After all, one is as young as one feels. In fact, many older people have adopted this strategy. Other associated responses are to deny being elderly, to deliberately refrain from becoming a member of any organization of the elderly, or to consciously not take part in any political activity by and on behalf of the elderly. In two studies, students of mine investigated the link between identification with the elderly and political participation.

The first study was conducted among people of 55 and older in selected neighborhoods in two Dutch cities. Within those neighborhoods, organizations of the elderly attempted to involve older people in political decision making about facilities and services for their benefit (Van Rijn, 2001). The second study was conducted to test a newly developed scale to measure identification with the elderly (Korving, 1997). In both studies—in addition to group identification—the preparedness to participate in collective action on behalf of the elderly was assessed.

*Self-categorization.* Two thirds of the senior citizens interviewed in the first study did not categorize themselves as elderly people. On average, people older than 70.6 years old were considered by respondents to fit into this category. For three quarters of the sample, the critical boundary was some age above their own. Note that in terms of Dutch legislation, all the interviewees formally belonged to the elderly. This study also revealed that self-categorization as an older person is predominantly motivated by the experience of health problems (van Rijn, 2001). It should not come as a surprise that no correlation was found between this kind of self-categorization and participation in organizations of the elderly or collective action on behalf of the elderly. Self-categorization as an older person even reduced the likelihood of people participating in action groups.

*A scale to measure social identity.* It appeared that identification with the elderly was not very strong. Approximately one quarter of the participants in this study identified with the elderly (Korving, 1997). It is important to note that self-categorization as an older person (cognitive identity) correlated much stronger with age ( $r = 0.41$ ) than the evaluative and affective component (0.20 and 0.11, respectively). This confirms Turner et al.'s (1994) observation that

social identity is not just a matter of social construction but must fit with existing knowledge about ourselves and other people.

Scores on the identity scales were correlated with preparedness to take part in collective action on behalf of the elderly. Each component did correlate with action preparedness but the strength of the correlation differed: 0.23 for the cognitive component, 0.17 for the evaluative component, and 0.63 for the affective component. This last correlation is remarkably high. It suggests that it is not so much the extent to which people belong to a group, or how they evaluate the status of that group, but the attachment to the group that determines whether someone is prepared to take action.

Nobody belongs to the elderly group by birth, but eventually everybody does. Numerous people make the transition in identity only when a decline in health forces them to do so. Therefore, self-categorization as an elderly person hardly stimulates political activism. Only if there is also some level of commitment to the category does a link to activism develop. Thus, salience of group membership is not sufficient; more important is what evokes this salience. If, as is the case of the elderly, it is increasing discomfort, action preparedness is not stimulated. A more positive commitment is needed. Indeed, Britt and Heise (2000) argue eloquently that shame must turn into pride for identification with a marginal group to motivate collective action.

#### **AFFECTIVE VERSUS BEHAVIORAL IDENTIFICATION: PROTEST PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH AFRICA**

We asked participants in a study of protest participation in South Africa whether they felt close to each of nine categories. Five categories concern traditional cleavages in a society: language, religion, and race as aspects of ethnicity; work and financial situation as aspects of social class; four others refer to new cleavages such as gender, generation, neighborhood, and political affiliation (Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak, & Giugni, 1995). In addition to these questions concerning the affective component of group identification, the interviews also included questions about the behavioral component. We asked the respondents whether they were involved in a number of organizations connected with the categories included in my identification measure. The connection is often apparent, for example, in the case of women's or youth organizations or political organizations and unions. Other categories, however, require more explanation. For instance, ethnic organizations are organizations created to guard the cultural heritage of an ethnic group. Land-organizations are concerned with the redistribution of land between Blacks and Whites; as such, they fit the category of class organizations. The category of neighborhood organizations includes neighborhood committees, tenant organizations, and street committees. Membership of these organizations may be seen as a behavioral expression of identification with the category these organizations are connected with.

We expected to find positive correlations between affective and behavioral identification. That is to say, that identification with a social category goes together with involvement in organizations connected to that category. This is indeed what we found (see Table 1).

*Protest participation.* To answer the question of whether group identification fosters participation in political protest, We linked respondents' preparedness to take part in peaceful action to his or her group identification and participation in the aforementioned identity organizations. Indeed, involvement in an organization increases the preparedness to take part in peaceful action irrespective of whether someone belongs to the African population. This holds true for all types of organizations. Group identification correlates with action preparedness as well, albeit at a lower level than its behavioral counterpart. However, with the exception of class identification and political identification, this correlation disappears once we control for being Black or not. The African population is more prepared to take part in collective action but identifies more strongly with people from the same ethnic background, gender, generation, and neighborhood. As a consequence, identification and participation are correlated. Statistical control eliminates this correlation but not for class and political identification. Irrespective of whether someone belongs to the African population group, identification with class and involvement in class organizations fosters action preparedness. The same holds for political identification and involvement in political organizations.

#### **DOES IDENTITY CAUSES PROTEST OR THE OTHER WAY AROUND? FARMERS' PROTEST IN THE NETHERLANDS**

The farmers' protest study purported to examine the changing relationship between the agricultural sector and politics in the Netherlands. During the 1990s, farmers and government increasingly found themselves in opposition with each other. During the years of my study, this conflict reached a climax in the conflict over manure surpluses. As a consequence of this and other confrontations, group identification among Dutch farmers politicized. In this study, we wanted to look for possible traces of the process of politicization; moreover, because of the longitudinal design of this study, we were able to investigate the causal relationship between group identification and protest participation.

In winter 1993-1994, winter 1995, and autumn 1995, we interviewed 168 Dutch farmers about the situation in the agricultural sector, their identification with farmers as a group (how close they felt to other farmers and how actively they were involved in farmers' organizations), their preparedness to take part in collective action, and their actual participation.

We began with the assumption that group identification of Dutch farmers is politicized. By this we mean that the group defines itself in opposition to some political authority. Indeed, more than 60% of the farmers feel angry toward

**TABLE 1: Identification and Participation in Peaceful Protest in South Africa, Wave 2: Standardized Betas**

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
Ethnic identification		
Black	—	0.31***
Identification with language	0.04**	-0.01
Identification with religion	-0.06***	-0.02
Identification with race	0.02	0.02
Involved in cultural organization	0.10**	0.09***
Identification with generation		
Black	—	0.29***
Identification with generation	0.06***	0.02*
Involved in youth organization	0.15***	0.10***
Gender identification		
Black	—	0.22***
Gender identification	0.06***	0.02
Involved in women's organization	0.11***	0.08***
Identification with neighborhood		
Black	—	0.29***
Identification with neighborhood	0.05***	-0.00
Involved in civic issues	0.10***	0.07***
Involved in street committees	0.09***	0.05***
Class identification		
Black	—	0.22***
Identification with work	0.05***	0.05**
Identification with financial situation	-0.04***	-0.05**
Involved in union	0.11***	0.10***
Involved in land organization	0.07	0.05**
Political identification		
Black	—	0.30***
Identification with politics	0.03**	0.05***
Involved in political organization	0.15***	0.08***

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

some political authority. Yet, the picture is confusing because the question of who is held responsible for the situation in Dutch agriculture has no simple answer. Agricultural politics is not only national politics, but European politics as well. As a consequence, both national and European authorities can be held responsible. Thus, Dutch farmers assess responsibilities in a variety of ways. In the eyes of 40% of the farmers, the European Union is the responsible authority; 26% deems the Dutch government responsible. But, when it comes down to the question of who they are angry with, not even 2% mention the European Union. Fifteen percent refer to the Dutch government and 28% to "politics in general." In other words, if politicization implies a group defining itself in opposition to political authorities, Dutch farmers do seem to be politicized. However, they do not specify a clear target of protest among these authorities. Given the

percentages observed, the Dutch government is, however, a more likely target than the European Union.

*Participation in farmers' protest.* In each wave of the interviews, we asked whether respondents were prepared to take part in protest and whether they had participated in political protest in the past year. In winter 1993-1994, group identification and participation in farmers' organizations predicted readiness to participate in protest. Indeed, identification with the group reinforced action participation. Action preparedness in winter 1995 is predominantly determined by action preparedness in 1993-1994. Action preparedness in autumn 1995 is predominantly determined by action preparedness in winter 1995, although participation in farmers' organizations in the previous period has a marginal impact. Actual participation in winter 1995 was determined by action preparedness in winter 1993-1994 and by participation in farmers' organizations. In autumn 1995, the same trend was observed. Again, action preparedness and participation in farmers' organizations in the previous year influenced protest participation.

*Direction of causality.* As we conducted three waves of interviews, it was possible to examine the causal relationship between group identification and protest participation. To that end, we conducted regression analyses with in-group identification and participation in farmers' organizations in the last wave as dependent variables and protest participation as the independent variable, whereas we controlled for levels of identification and participation in organizations in previous waves. In the case of in-group identification, we found no effect of protest participation. However, protest participation influenced the behavioral dimension of group identification. The degree of participation in farmers' organizations increased among those who participated in protest activities. These results suggest that, at least in the case of the behavioral component of group identification, the causal relation between participation and identification is bidirectional.

Thus, politicization of group identification does indeed seem to stimulate protest participation. From the very beginning, group identification among farmers was high. Whether this is the result of the confrontations in the past or other factors is difficult to assess on the basis of my research. Yet, the fact that I did find a relationship between identification and protest participation—despite the restricted variation in identification scores—suggests that it is a theoretically relevant relationship. Both affective and behavioral identification predict preparedness to participate. Action participation is predicted directly by behavioral identification and indirectly (via action preparedness) by affective and behavioral identification. As for the direction of causality, this study suggests that affective identification reinforces protest participation but not the other way around. Behavioral identification, however, both influences and is influenced by protest participation.

## CONCLUSION

Group identification is a significant factor in the explanation of participation in protest. That much is clear on the basis of the above. Three studies in very different contexts demonstrated that identification fosters protest participation. My results confirm the results of the limited number of social psychological studies on this subject. Of the three components of identity distinguished in social identity literature—cognitive, evaluative, and affective—the latter seems to be the most important for protest behavior. This too confirms previous research.

Adding a behavioral component turned out to be useful in this setting. Group identification becomes manifest in membership to identity organizations; that is, organizations that gather members of a specific social category. Both the affective and the behavioral dimension appear to be predictors of action preparedness, but my results suggest that only the behavioral dimension predicts actual behavior. Apparently, commitment to identity organizations makes it more likely for people to participate in collective action on behalf of the group involved. Of course, this is not only a matter of identification but also of involvement in the networks playing a role in protest mobilization.

My results suggest that the relationship between identification and protest participation can go either way: identity fosters participation, and participation reinforces identification. This should not come as a surprise. Naturally, people are only willing to make sacrifices for a group with which they identify. On the other hand, it is also apparent that sacrificing for the group strengthens identification with the group.

Returning to my introduction, the evidence reported here confirms that group identification fosters protest participation. Kelly and Breinlinger (1996) and Simon et al. (1998) argued before that the identity pathway to protest participation functions independently from the calculative pathway. All this suggests that identification helps to overcome the dilemma of collective action. To be sure, mere calculation may suggest that one could take a free ride and leave it to the others to work for the collective good, but the more one identifies with the group the less likely such a strategy will be.

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